

SECRETARY OF THE NAVY HAMILTON TO
COMMODORE JOHN RODGERS

Comre Rodgers
N York

Nav: Dep'mt
21 May 1812

As a war appears now inevitable, I request you to state to me, a plan of operations, which, in your judgment, will enable our little navy to annoy in the utmost extent, the Trade of Gt Britain while it least exposes it to the immense naval force of the Government. State also the Ports of the US which you think the safest as asylums for our navy, in time of war.

P. Hamilton

COMMODORE JOHN RODGERS TO
SECRETARY OF THE NAVY HAMILTON

U.S. Frigate *President*

Staten Island June 3d, 1812

Sir,

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 21st ult, and in answer to your enquiries permit me to state, that in my humble opinion to annoy the trade of Great Britain with the greatest effect would be at the commencement of a War, to dispose our comparatively very small force, in such a way as to harass her W India commerce by our lightest vessels: and her coasting trade, East India trade & other foreign trade by our Frigates & one or two of our fastest sailing sloops of war: our small vessel to be disposed in a way, according to circumstance, to annoy to the greatest extent all the avenues leading to & from her West India Islands, Surinam, Berbice, & Demamara: a small squadron of two, or three of our fastest sailing frigates & a single sloop of War, to cruise on the coasts of England, Ireland & Scotland; & the residue of our frigates to act separately, or in squadron on our own coasts to harass the enemy by cruising in the tracts of his ships trading between him & his colonies of Canada, Nova Scotia & Newfoundland: and occasionally to unite all our Frigates & attack his East India convoys.

This, Sir, would in my opinion, be the most advisable disposition that could be made of our little navy, at least for the first six months, perhaps during the whole of the War: as it would be menacing them in the very teeth, & effecting the destruction [sic] of their commerce in a manner the most perplexing to their government, & in a way the least expected the nation generally, including those belonging to the Navy: the self styled Lords of the Ocean!!

Such a view as I have taken of the subject may, at first sight, appear chimerical: particularly if we reason arithmetically, & take into consideration that we have only a dozen vessels in commission & they five hundred: but this is the very reason, I think, why such dispersion should be made, as by the like, it would require a comparatively much greater force to protect their own trade, even at the mouths of their own harbors, than it would to annihilate ours, & our little navy with I; was such a dispositions to be exercised as to invite their whole disposable force to our coast, or even to any considerable distance from their own.

By this I am not to be understood, Sir, as saying that our vessels ought to remain stationary at any one point; but, on the contrary, that they ought to be kept moving from one part of the coast to another; particularly those stationed on the coast of England from one part of that coast to another, until the attention of a large portion of their most active force has been drawn to the protection of their own commerce, in their own waters: having effected this, our vessels ought then to leave the coast and not return to it again until they had drawn the enemy off to protect his trade in some other quarter.

It is very generally believed that the coasts of England, Ireland & Scotland are always swarming with British Men of War, and that their commerce would be found most amply protected against any force as I have mentioned: this however I well know by experience in my voyages when a youth, to be incorrect and that, it has always been their policy, to keep their enemies as far distant from their shores as possible; by stationing their ships as the commencement of a War, on the enemies coasts, & in such other distant situations, as to render its effect nugatory, & thereby be enabled to protect their own commerce in a two fold degree – This however they have been enabled to do, owing as well to the inactivity of the enemy, as to the local advantages derived from their relative situations, and to support what I now say, I do assert, that in the event of a War, it will be found, that the largest force they will soon be able to send to our Coast, will not prevent the few vessels we have, from getting to sea, and annoying their Commerce to an extent not only to make them feel their effect most seriously, but at the same time in a manner to astonish all Europe – In time they will soon find that we are neither Frenchmen, or Spaniards, Hollanders, or Danes.

Permit me, Sir, to say, that in the event of a war it would be particularly gratifying to me to command, on the coast of England, such a squadron as I have mentioned; as I conceive that, barring unforeseen accidents, such as ought not to be expected, I may with propriety pledge myself to make the commerce of that arrogant nation feel its effects to the very quick – They have already I perceive honored me with a place in their lying naval chronicle with the title of Buccaneer, and nothing on this side of the grave would afford me more satisfaction, than to have such an opportunity, as I have mentioned, of affording them a more bitter subject for their still more bitter & illiberal animadversions.

In the event of a War with England, should our small vessels be employed in the W Indies: Charleston & Savannah, would be the most eligible places of rendezvous for them; as well because these places would be nearest to the enemy, as on account of the inaccessibility of the coast to strangers; & for the same reasons would be found the safest port, to send their prizes into: Charleston would I think be found the most suitable of the two, as the enemy could not calculate on Blockading it with any degree of effect.

Our Coast from Cape Hatteras to Passamaquoddy affords almost numberless good ports for our small vessels in time of War; any of which that are fortified, would answer perfectly well: New York I think however the most preferable, as on account of its easy access & egress, by way of the sound & Sandy Hook, they would find no difficulty in getting out or in at any time; neither any in equipping their vessels with the greatest dispatch.

There are no ports south of Cape Hatteras except it be Port Royal (S.C.) (and that is not fortified) capable of being made a suitable place of rendezvous for our frigate in time of War; neither are there many even north of that in the present state of our country, but what present

some obstacles- no ports either in the Chesapeak or Delaware would be suitable, as the entrance of either might be blockaded with much effect by a superior force: and there is almost an equal objection to New York on account of its inaccessibility, there not being more than one hour in the twenty four that affords sufficient depths of water to admit of our larges frigates Sandy Hook Bar:-As a rendezvous for our frigates I must therefore say that , from any knowledge I possess of the several ports north of the Chesapeak, New Port & Boston are the most suitable; & of the two, New Port the most as it is most easy to access & egress at all seasons of the year; and our revolutionary war furnishes proof that a superior force would find it very difficult, if not impossible to prevent, for any length of time, an inferior one from getting to sea: I should therefore recommend New Port as the most suitable rendezvous for our frigates in time of war. With the greatest respect [&c.]

Jn^o Rodgers

PS Sir

Previous to the commencement of war permit me to suggest whether it might not be advisable to remove our frigates from Norfolk, as the enemy might with a superior force, Blockade them from Hampton Road

N.B. I have a lame finger which makes my writing even more unintelligible than it generally is; but owing to the subject of this scrawl I did not like to have it copied by any one else.